



Fighting for Freedom: Black Contributions to the Civil War

"Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship."
Frederick Douglass, July 6, 1863

Overview

Before and during the Civil War, Black people were fully engaged in the fight for their own freedom. In this unit, students will explore how many enslaved people and free Blacks – men, women, and children – contributed to the fight for their freedom in numerous ways. Through the exploration of Document Sets (each inclusive of readings, primary sources, video, art, etc.), students can explore four particular areas of Black contributions and experiences in the fight for freedom, including: **United States Colored Troops (USCT), Black Naval Service, Black Spies, and Black Women During the Civil War**. As a culminating project, students will write and contribute to an 1864 issue of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, reflecting what they have learned.

For related themes/topics, see the lesson plan ["North Carolina's 35th USCT."](#)

Grades

- 8-12
- This activity can also be used with students in 4th and 5th grade by adapting the level of the readings in each Document Set, and/or focusing more on the visual materials.

Materials

- **Document Sets and Response Sheets:**
Teachers should review each Document Set prior to implementing the activity. Teachers have the choice of whether to utilize all or only some of the Document Set based on each individual classroom's learning goals and time available. Likewise, teachers can choose to omit or swap out sources within each Document Set based on the learning level of students and/or time available. Teachers with 1:1 technology may also choose to utilize these Document Sets in electronic format. Provided Document Sets include (click on the title to access):
 - [USCT Document Set & Response Sheet](#)
 - Overview Reading: History of the United States Colored Troops
 - 35th U.S. Colored Troops - An American Story
 - "To Colored Men"
 - U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery
 - Image of Private Louis Martin of the Twenty-Ninth USCT
 - North Carolina's 'African Brigade' Raids the State's Interior, 1863
 - Drummer Boys
 - [Black Naval Service Document Set & Response Sheet](#)
 - Overview Reading: Black Contributions to the Union Navy
 - Photograph: Black Sailors on USS Miami

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- William Gould
- Dempsey Hill
- Photograph: Civil War Sailor
- Michelle Howard quote
- [Black Spies During the Civil War Document Set & Response Sheet](#)
 - Overview Reading: Black Spies Played Pivotal Roles in the U.S. Civil War
 - Letter from Mary Louveste, 1868
 - Abraham Galloway (video)
 - Beyond the Underground Railroad: Harriet Tubman, Spy & Tactical Mastermind
 - Frederick Douglass quote, 1862
- [Black Women During the Civil War Document Set & Response Sheet](#)
 - Overview Reading: Black Women and the Civil War
 - Art Review: Lucy Higgs
 - Susie King Taylor
 - Photograph: Black Hospital Workers and Nurses, July 1863
 - Harriet Jacobs
 - Music and Spirituals
 - Letter from Letty Barnes
- Laptop with internet access & sound; at least one device will be needed for each group of students, since each document set contains at least one video to review.
- Culminating Project: Create an Issue of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, assignment sheet attached

Duration

- Day 1 (focusing on USCT): 60+ minutes
- Days 2-3 (focusing on any or all of the topics of Naval Service, Spies, and Women): At least 30+ minutes for the exploration of each Document Set (time will vary depending on the number of sources shared and the level of students)
- Teachers may choose to shorten the days devoted to this topic by implementing only one or a few of the Document Sets, and/or altering the sources in each Set. However, by utilizing all four, which are interconnected, students can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the numerous ways Black people contributed to the Civil War and fought for their own freedom in diverse ways.

Preparation

- Students should have a foundational knowledge of the complexities of slavery and freedom, including an understanding that Black people strove to create and experience varied concepts of freedom through their individual and collective agency, resistance, and resilience - both before and during the Civil War. They did not simply wait for another person to “free” them.
 - See the lesson series [Freedom Seeking Across North Carolina](#) to elevate these themes in your classroom. The following “Fighting for Freedom” unit will build upon this understanding with its focus on the experiences and contributions of Black people during the Civil War.
- Students must understand expectations for respectfully discussing “hard history” such as enslavement and the Civil War. While this history brings up difficult topics such as racism and racial violence, such history represents a part of our shared state and national history that students must understand in order to comprehend its impact on the present. To ensure students are able to respectfully and empathetically discuss such topics, teachers must ensure a foundation of civil discourse, respect and empathy in the classroom. For techniques on building such a classroom community, see Carolina K-12’s [Tips for Tackling](#)

[Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](#) and/or [Teaching Hard History: Why & How](#).

- Students should be explicitly prepared for the historical terminology they will encounter, including words such as “Colored” and “Negro.” Ensure students understand that while these were terms commonly used during the Civil War years, it is not appropriate to utilize such terms today.
- Prior to class, teachers may want to set up the room for group work or reserve a space conducive to group work (such as the media center).

Procedure

Day 1

Warm Up: “Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand”

1. As a warm up, provide students with the attached excerpt of “Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand,” by Frederick Douglass. Have students review who Frederick Douglass was, then have them read the passage and respond with their initial thoughts to the questions provided. (This can be done individually or with discussion partners.) After around 5 minutes, discuss as an entire class:
 - What is the tone of this passage? What is Frederick Douglass’s message?
 - What injustice(s) is Douglass addressing?
 - Why do you think Black people were initially restricted from military service in the Civil War?
 - What arguments does Douglass note as to why Black people should be allowed in the military?
 - Why do you think Douglass titled this, “Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand”?
 - If you had to pick one line or phrase that represents Douglass’s strongest or most compelling statement/argument, which would you pick and why?
 - How do you think the government responded to this?

Black Contributions and the On-Going Struggle for Freedom

2. Let students know that the Lincoln administration wrestled with the idea of authorizing the federal recruitment of Black troops throughout the start of the Civil War, concerned that such a move would prompt the border states to secede. While the US government did eventually legalize the recruitment of Black troops in 1863, Black people had already been contributing to the War effort via state regiments and/or unsanctioned volunteer roles (with no federal support). Additionally, there were numerous other ways that Black men, women and children – free and enslaved – contributed to the Union effort and/or continued their own fight for freedom before, during and after the Civil War. Discuss:
 - What do you already know about the USCT?
 - In addition to USCT service, what are all the ways you can think of that Black men and women, free and enslaved, contributed to Union efforts during the Civil War and/or participated in the fight for freedom (whether for themselves or collectively?)
 - *Note student thoughts on a list at the front of the room; keep the list visibly posted in order to return to it later.*

Introduction to United States Colored Troops

3. Let students know that they are going to be learning more about these themes and topics, starting with the United States Colored Troops, in a group activity. (Prior to introducing the lesson, teachers should review each of the **Document Sets** [all are hyperlinked under the “Materials” section] to determine whether to omit or substitute any of the Document Sets, or any of the sources provided within them. The **Response Sheet** provided should be edited based on any changes made.) Divide students into small groups and provide them with the appropriate materials and instructions:
 - Each student should receive an individual copy of the [Response Sheet and the Overview Reading for the USCT included in the USCT Document Set](#).
 - Teachers can either provide only one copy per group of the remaining sources (to save copying) or print the entire USCT Document Set so that each student in the group has their own copy.
 - Another option for 1:1 schools is to provide the Document Set in electronic format.
 - Groups will work together to read the Overview and discuss/answer the corresponding questions. Teachers should pre-determine whether students in each group will then work on each additional source in the Document Set together, or whether each individual student in the group will focus on one source from the Document Set, then teach their group about their source.
 - Review the expectations for on-task and respectful group work and allow students to get started.
 - Time for students to work independently in their groups will vary based on the learning level of students and the sources provided. (If a teacher removes sources from the Document Set, for instance, or students each focus on one source and report out on it, time in groups will be less.) A minimum of 30 minutes is estimated.
 - Document Sets can also be completed individually rather than in groups.
4. Once students have worked with their groups to analyze the USCT Document Set, come back together for a processing and reflective discussion.
 - How was freedom a more complex concept for Black people (rather than the “free” or “enslaved” binary we often mistakenly assume)?
 - While we sometimes think (mistakenly) that Black people were simply awaiting freedom to be granted by the Emancipation Proclamation, what are the ways Black people actually strove to define and experience various concepts of freedom themselves - before, during and even after the War?
 - This is an important and rich concept to take time to discuss with students throughout the study of slavery and the Civil War. For generations before the Civil War began, enslaved people in North Carolina sought freedom and liberated themselves in a diversity of ways. They did not wait for liberation from enslavers or the government. Rather, they used both covert and overt resistance to subvert bondage. They often leveraged North Carolina’s rich landscape—from forests to waterways to swamps—and networks/communities (from free Blacks to other enslaved people) to claim their own freedom. Freedom was not something granted on a single day by the Emancipation Proclamation; there was no decree that instantly “released” waiting people. Rather, liberation in North Carolina (as throughout the South) was more complex. Ultimately, Black people had been seeking and claiming freedom through their own agency, resistance, and

resilience since the beginning of slavery and achieved liberation over a period of years, while navigating power, politics, and warfare throughout.

- Let students know that you will continue talking about this theme as they learn about other ways Black people contributed during the Civil War beyond the USCT.
 - In what various ways were Black men already contributing to the Union, even before the federal government legalized Black troops? Why do you think so many enlisted, even though the government had grappled with whether or not to allow them to do so?
 - Based on what you analyzed in your Document Set and your own inferences, what do you imagine the realities were like for Black soldiers? What inequities and elevated dangers did Black men face compared to their white counterparts?
5. As a final “exit ticket”/reflection for the day, provide each student with a Post-It Note. Call their attention back to the chart they compiled during Step 2 and ask that they now add to it by answering on their Post-It: Based on your new learnings/understandings, what else might we add to our list of the ways Black men, women, and children - free and enslaved - contributed to Union efforts during the Civil War and/or participated in the fight for freedom (whether for themselves or collectively)?

Days 2 and/or 3

Black Naval Service, Black Spies, and Black Women

6. With a foundation in the USCT, teachers can now broaden and deepen student understandings of additional Black contributions and freedom seeking during the Civil War by utilizing the three additional (and interconnected) Document Sets provided: [Black Naval Service](#), [Black Spies](#), and [Black Women](#). (As a reminder, teachers should review each Document Set to determine whether students will review all the sources provided in the Set. Omitting or swapping out sources is always an option.) The time needed for implementation of each Set will vary based on these decisions. Options for implementation:
- **Rotating Stations:** Set these three topics up in stations around the classroom. (For instance, you might divide students into 6 groups and have 2 stations of each topic for students to rotate between.) Each station will need multiple copies (1 per student) of the Overview Reading and Response Sheet, and at least one copy of the Document Set. At least 1 laptop connected to the internet (with sound) will also be needed per station. (Teachers in 1:1 schools may choose to provide the Document Sets electronically.)
 - **Jigsaw:** Jigsaw is a cooperative learning strategy that enables each student of a “home” group to specialize in one of these three topics. Students will meet with their home group to together review the Document Set assigned to them (Navy, Spies, or Women) and become experts on the topic. After analyzing the Document Set and “mastering” the material, students will move into new mixed groups, each new group including students who are now experts on all three topics. In these new groups, students will teach each other about their assigned topic.
 - **Basic Individual or Group Exploration:** Teachers can also choose to replicate the same process utilized when studying USCT, with all groups examining one Document Set. If ample class time exists, groups can do each Document Set over the course of several class periods. Or each group can be assigned one of the three topics that they then report out on and teach the other groups about in a whole-class share. (Document Sets can also be analyzed individually.)

Culminating Reflections

7. After students have reviewed your chosen Document Sets, close with a reflective discussion:
- Of everything you have learned regarding the contributions of Black men, women, and children throughout the Civil War, and the various ways they fought for their freedom, what most intrigued or surprised you and why?
 - Can you think of other contributions Black people likely made that weren't addressed in your readings?
 - Of all the roles Black people filled and all the contributions they made, which do you think were most important or impactful and why?
 - Which roles/contributions would have been at the greatest risk and how so? What does it say about the people who took these risks anyway?
 - How does what you have learned today/over the past few days change your previous image and/or understanding of Black people during the Civil War?
 - Think back to the video you viewed about NC's 35th USCT, when Dr. Bernard George said that this "is *the American story*." Why are all these themes/topics important for each of us to know and celebrate, as Americans?

Culminating Project: Create an Issue of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*

8. As a culminating project, provide students with the attached assignment, "Create an Issue of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*." Let students know that during the Civil War, the Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass produced a newspaper simply called *Frederick Douglass's Paper*. (You may want to project samples of the actual publications, available at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-newspapers/about-this-collection/>.) Let students know that as a culminating project, they will write and contribute to the publication of an 1864 issue of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, reflecting what they have learned regarding how numerous Black men and women - free and enslaved - contributed to Union efforts during the Civil War and/or participated in the fight for freedom (whether for themselves or collectively). Go over the various topic choices with students and the details of the assignment. Teachers should determine how to both let students choose their topics, but also ensure a diversity of topics in the final issue of the paper. Let students know the due date, as well as how their work will be combined and then shared.

Name: _____

WARM UP

**EXCERPT from Fighting Rebels With Only One Hand
(by Frederick Douglass, from Douglass' Monthly, September 1861)**

What on earth is the matter with the American Government and people?

Washington, the seat of Government...is now positively in danger of falling before the rebel army... Generals are calling...for men. "Men! men! send us men!" they scream, or the cause of the Union is gone...and yet these very officers...refuse to receive the class of men which have a deeper interest in the defeat of the rebels, than all others.

Men are wanted in Missouri...in Western Virginia...in Texas, and all along the sea coast, and though the Government has at its command a class deeply interested in suppressing the insurrection, it sternly refuses to summon a single man, and insults the whole class by refusing to allow any of their number to defend with their strong arms and brave hearts the national cause.

Why does the Government reject the Negro? Is he not a man? Can he not wield a sword, fire a gun, march...and obey orders like any other?

If we can be allowed to speak to the President of the United States, we should ask him if this is a time for prejudice? We would tell him that General Jackson fought side by side with Negroes at New Orleans, and he bore testimony to their bravery at the close of the war. We would tell him that colored men in Rhode Island and Connecticut performed their full share in the war of the Revolution. We would tell him that this is no time to fight with one hand, when both are needed; this is no time to fight only with your white hand, and allow your black hand to remain tied.

We insist upon it, that one black regiment...would be worth to the Government more than two of any other. Men in earnest don't fight with one hand, when they might fight with two, and a man drowning would not refuse to be saved even by a colored hand.

Answer:

1. What is the tone of this passage? What is Frederick Douglass's message?
2. What arguments does Douglass note as to why Black people should be allowed to serve in the military?
3. Why do you think Douglass titled this, "Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand"?
4. If you had to pick one line or phrase that represents Douglass's strongest or most compelling statement/argument, which would you pick and why?
5. In what ways do you think Black men and women (free and enslaved) contributed to Union efforts during the Civil War?

Create an Issue of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*

During the Civil War, the Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass produced a newspaper simply called *Frederick Douglass's Paper*. Your assignment is to contribute to a publication of an 1864 issue of *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, reflecting what you have learned regarding how numerous Black men and women - free and enslaved - contributed to Union efforts during the Civil War and/or participated in the fight for freedom (whether for themselves or collectively).

You will work on an editorial team in which you are responsible for creating one of the following:

- News article on the contributions made by USCT or Black Navy Men
- First-person account of the experience of a Black soldier, seaman, spy, nurse, drummer boy, relief worker, or freedom seeker
- Petition from the NC 35th Colored Troops listing arguments for equality (pay, supplies, rations, rank, treatment, etc.)
- Letter to the editor criticizing the treatment of Black soldiers when captured by Confederate troops (using the Plymouth Massacre as evidence)
- Editorial heralding the numerous ways Black women are rising to the challenges posed during the Civil War and contributing to the Union efforts and their communities
- Abolitionist column discussing the complex notions of freedom of the time
- A political cartoon, including captions, addressing the hypocrisy of the inequalities present during the Civil War (i.e., prohibition of Black enlistees, treatment of Black troops once enlisted, etc.)
- Have an original idea? Pitch it to the teacher!

Make sure your final product:

- Is based on realistic, accurate facts. (You may need to do additional research.)
- Includes a headline and/or attention-grabbing first sentence
- Is written with a clear introduction, supporting details, and conclusion
- Contains accurate spelling and grammar (do not use any kind of vernacular)
- Is designed to look like it is part of an 1864 newspaper. You may also want to create visuals to accompany your final piece.

First Draft Due: _____ Final Draft Due: _____